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ABSTRACT

Parents need to be involved in the academic lives and the literacy learning of their children. Literature is a natural way to involve parents in the process. Through a thematic unit on families, students learn about themselves and their families. Students read books with a family theme and work in literature circles on projects, papers, and reading. Parents become involved in the classroom projects by answering questions their children have about family members and family memories. Through literature, students can learn about themselves and their world, expand their hearts and their minds, and stretch their imaginations. Literature can help students see their connection to a family, and can help parents bridge the gaps that threaten to separate them from their children. (Appended is an outline of the thematic unit discussed.) (MG)

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USING LITERATURE TO INCREASE
PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

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USING LITERATURE TO INCREASE PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

Language arts teachers have used quality literature for years and have instilled in many of their students a love of learning and a passion for fine literature. They have read aloud to students (Friedberg & Strong, 1989) and have encouraged children to share books with each other (O'Halloran, 1987). They have shared enduring classics and have introduced the classics of the future. They have contemplated, as well as laughed and cried over a variety of genres, authors, and themes (Peterson, 1989). All of this has generally been done, however, in the confines of the classroom. While these activities are the very essence of good literature teaching (Cullinan, 1987) and the lifeblood of language learning (Strickland, 1987), there is another dimension to literature that is often overlooked. Quality literature can very naturally lead to increased parental involvement in the schools, and can help children understand the value of family interdependency.

Why Involve Parents in the School's Reading Program?

The first question that some language teachers may ask at this point is, "Exactly what role should a parent play in the reading program in my classroom?" While it is advisable to carefully consider all the dimensions of parental involvement in schools, much research shows us that involving parents in schools

can give only positive results (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Reed, 1988). In a monograph published by the National Middle School Association, John Meyers (1985) outlines some of the positive effects of involving parents in school. These benefits are outlined specifically for the pre-adolescent who is usually served in a Middle School setting, but the benefits can certainly be felt in all grades.

Meyers cites research which shows parent involvement in schools leads to improved academic performance on the part of the students. A number of exemplary programs for parent involvement show that the academic performance improves regardless of the parents' socio-economic status or educational level (Brandt, 1989). When parents are involved in school programs, they become closer to their children. When school becomes a shared experience, a family experience, parents and children have more to share with each other. Relations between home and school, as well as between the school and the community, improve as parents become involved in school activities. Meyers reminds us that parents have the skills needed to help students in the classroom, both academically and socially. A truly collaborative arrangement between parents and teachers can lighten the teacher's load and give the students some extra support and understanding. Students need the kind of support that only parents can give, both at home and at school. Finally, we must remember that services performed by parents and other volunteers do not cost anything.

In summary, parent involvement is a positive dimension of many exemplary programs, leading to improvements for students both academically and socially. Parents need to be involved in the academic lives of their children, and they need to be involved in the literacy learning of their children. Literature is a natural way to involve them in the process.

A Thematic Unit on Families

What follows is an overview of a thematic unit on families that was designed for the middle grades. The focus of the unit is literature; but activities are mentioned that bring in social studies, math, science, art, and music in an interdisciplinary format. The unit was used by a sixth grade teacher in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in a self-contained classroom. Some of the activities that are suggested are adaptations that were developed by the teacher and her students as they learned about themselves and their families.

The unit was introduced by the first author of this paper through the sharing of the book The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant. After the book was shared via a media presentation, students discussed things they remembered about family reunions and family gatherings. Students then worked in groups of two and three to brainstorm some possible sources of study for a two-week unit on families. Many students decided they would interview family members about unusual or interesting facts pertaining to the family. Some decided they would research their own baby books and other family books to construct their family tree. Others wanted to find out about their parents when they were in sixth grade. They decided that some investigative journalism was in order.

As part of the unit, students were required to read a book with a family theme. A list was provided for the students (see Appendix) and many chose books that they could discuss with friends. Since these students were accustomed to literature circles (Harste & Short, 1988), they decided about group structure and group responsibilities on the first day of the unit. The students were allowed to work in groups for the

remainder of the hour, and many decisions were made about projects, papers, and reading.

How the Parents Got Involved

Parents became involved in the classroom projects by answering questions their children had about family members and family memories. Parents were the experts and students were the researchers for many of these projects. One parent was hesitant to share the "deep, dark secrets of the past," but most saw this as an opportunity to share their memories, their experiences, and their lives with their children. The teacher reported that many parents were eager to share information and wanted to see final projects.

The students in this sixth grade classroom learned some things about themselves and about their families. They did this by considering the structure of a family, and then their part in the family. The reading of quality literature enhanced this for them. For example, when reading Katherine Paterson's Park's Quest, the story of a boy in search of information about his father who was killed in the Viet Nam War, many students came to grips with the possibilities of what would happen to them in a similar situation. By interviewing their parents, they were able to learn more about the strong ties that can hold families together.

The future impact of this unit of study for the families involved is two-fold. First, as these students move into junior high, they already have the beginnings of a strong foundation of trust and respect built with their parents. As for the parents, the doors of communication are open with their pre-adolescents. This will likely soften some of the rocky years ahead as the students move into adolescence.

Conclusion

Literature is a powerful tool. It can reveal individual differences as well as common bonds. It can help students better understand their own feelings and can also build a tolerance for the opinions of their peers (Marshall, 1984) and their families. Through literature, students can learn about themselves and their world (Hepler, 1988), expand their hearts and their minds, and stretch their imaginations. Literature can help students see their connection to a family, and can help parents bridge the gaps that threaten to separate them from their children. The parents and students described in this paper were connected by exploring good literature. Our feeling is that this connection can happen in other situations, as well. One book at a time, one family at a time, we can bind the world together through literature.

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APPENDIX

ME AND MY FAMILY Thematic Unit

Reading - All of these adolescent books portray families or have family stories in them. These books were suggested as the literature basis for the entire unit.

Paterson, Katherine. Park's Quest.

Jacob Have I Loved.

Voigt, Cynthia. Homecoming.

Dacey's Song.

Blume, Judy. Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing.

The Pain and the Great One.

Taylor, Mildred. Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

Let the Circle Be Unbroken.

The Gold Cadillac.

Danziger, Paula. The Cat Ate My Gymsuit.

Collier & Collier. My Brother Sam is Dead.

Brink, Carol. Caddie Woodlawn.

MacLachlan, Patricia. Sarah Plain and Tall.

Wilder, Laura. Little House on the Prairie.

Language Arts These are some of the activities that were suggested by the authors. Many of these were adapted by the students and their families. Numbers 1-4 of this group are taken from Family Stories in Creating Classrooms for Authors, (Harste & Short, 1989).

1. Interview family members about favorite stories that are told by or about family members again and again.
2. Share these family stories in groups or with the whole class.
3. Discuss the various strategies used for note taking, interviewing, sharing orally, and writing, and how these strategies can be used in other situations when researching.
4. Compile a book of family stories. These can be published in individual books, class books, or a class newspaper.
5. Explore folktales, looking at both oral story-telling and what happens to these stories when they are written down.
6. Write letters to distant relatives and ask them to write their version of a traditional family experience. Compare these stories to try to write the actual sequence of events, or put them in a book to share at the next family reunion.
7. Design an invitation to a family reunion.
8. Survey family members regarding some inherited characteristics.

Social Studies

1. Make a family tree of your ancestors. See how far back you can go with the help of your parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Be sure to look in family bibles, baby books, etc.
2. On a US map, mark all the places where you have relatives living.
3. An interesting follow-up is to have the whole class mark a large US map of all the living relatives of the whole group.
4. Bring in baby pictures and have a guessing contest.
5. Research the dress in the days when your parents were first married (or when you were born). Come to school dressed like your parents.
6. Find out the headlines of the local newspaper the day you were born. (This is a good way to teach students about micro-film.)
7. Have students care for a make-believe baby for a week and document all the things they learned about child care.

8. How do wars affect family members? In a discussion of My Brother Sam is Dead, you could talk about how wars sometimes split up families. It is not so easy to see the right and wrong side of war during the middle of it.

Math

1. On the US map where all of the relatives were labeled, determine a place to have a family reunion that would be the shortest distance for everyone to drive.
2. Determine the number of miles family members would have to travel in order to attend the reunion. How much gas would each family use? What would be the cost for flying? Taking a train? Compute the cost for the entire family to attend the reunion for 3 days.
3. Figure out the same costs if the reunion were to take place in the home town of your grandparents. Which would be a less expensive reunion?
4. Make a graph of the inherited characteristics of family members. Calculate the percentage of family members who have different characteristics. Predict the characteristics of your future children.
5. Make a graph of the number of relatives each student in the class has. variations: living in South Dakota, living in the US, living overseas, who work in big cities, who have traveled to Europe, who have children under the age of two, who have flown on airplanes, etc. (You can see that the possibilities are limitless. This would be a good time to bring out the differences in families. Graph the number of divorces, of stepchildren, of working mothers, etc. Teachers should use these ideas with discretion, and use the knowledge they possess about their students and their community.)
6. Discuss the difference between growing by addition and growing by multiplication. Use the family tree to show this. Discussion of the population explosion could enhance this discussion.

Science/Health

1. Discuss heredity. Use the chart about hereditary characteristics. Other factors could be discussed as well.
2. Plant seeds and discuss how different seeds produce different plants. (For the really adventurous, try grafting some plants to see different results!)
3. Discuss the problems with overpopulation. Talk about the limited amount of natural resources available for future families.
4. Perhaps a discussion of birth control and the problems with teen pregnancy could follow the discussion of population concerns.
5. Consider food costs for the family reunion that you planned. What kind of food will be needed? Do family members have allergies that must be considered (remember that some allergies are hereditary), are some family members vegetarian, do religious convictions determine eating styles, etc? Differences do affect the way we eat and act.
6. Talk about family hygiene. What can you share with a family member? What should you not share? (toothbrushes, hair brushes, etc.)

Art

1. Make a self-portrait, and/or a family portrait.
2. Create a family album. Make one of the present, and one of the future. Draw pictures of what your kids will look like based on the hereditary chart.
3. Design a comic strip based on some of your family members.
4. Draw caricatures of your favorite relative.
5. Illustrate some of your family stories.
6. Draw a mural of your life. This would resemble a pictorial time line.

Music

1. Sing songs with family themes.
2. Have a Square Dance with family members.
3. Play songs of the sixties while working on various projects.
4. Listen to the music of your parents and grandparents. This corresponds to the activity about the dress and news surrounding your birth.